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ABSTRACT

A college course in Organizational Communication typically involves the study of how people act within organizations, and why. Instructors should design a course which provides a realistically complex and extensive experiential simulation of organizational social dynamics over time, while still providing adequate theoretical input to facilitate a student's conceptual understanding of those dynamics. One approach to solving this problem is to design the course itself as an organizational simulation, with the purpose of the organization being related to the integrated, critical learning of organizational theory. Textbook readings provide an integrated conceptual overview of the role of communication in organizations. As students work through a series of exercises designed to help them identify people they could work with effectively, form teams, and work with others to accomplish various tasks, they use the reading material to guide their decision making in accomplishing these tasks. Assignments include a group-written final exam and a group-written term paper, and these, along with quizzes, participation, and peer evaluation, determine the final grade. By the end of the term students are expected to analyze objectively their own effectiveness as participants in the class organization, and to make defensible recommendations as to how they could have communicated more effectively. (MM)

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ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION, INC.: DESIGNING THE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THEORY CLASS AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL SIMULATION

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ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION, INC.: DESIGNING THE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THEORY CLASS AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL SIMULATION

ABSTRACT

Noting the apparently conflicting demands of designing organizational communication courses to meet theoretical and experiential pedagogical goals, this paper suggests that the conflict is resolvable by designing a course in organizational communication theory as an organizational simulation. The structure and operation of such a course is then described, with discussion of lessons learned from the experience of teaching it.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION, INC.:

DESIGNING THE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THEORY CLASS

AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL SIMULATION

A college course in Organizational Communication typically involves the study of how people act within organizations, and why. During the term, students study theories of organization and leadership, structural and environmental variables, internal organizational social systems, and examples of how these theories are applied in understanding personnel practices and interactive behavior in organizations. As students examine these topics, they are likely to run across many examples from real situations which will cause them to say to themselves, "How could that have happened? Couldn't the people involved see what the result of a policy like that would be?" The answer to such a question is too frequently, "No, they couldn't see what the result would be, because they were too close to the situation to recognize what was happening in the detached, intellectual terms the theories are cast in."

This insight is at the root of the common pedagogical decision to include extensive organizational simulations, involving the operation of fictional Marble Companies or fireworks manufacturing firms, in an organizational communication course's structure. The argument is made, with justification, that the ability to effectively manage organizational behavior derives not only from knowledge of theoretical insights and research

findings, but also from practice at organizing to jointly accomplish tasks through coordinated effort, applying those theoretical insights and research findings to decision making. An extensive experiential component is therefore necessary if the course in organizational communication is to be truly effective in helping the student to become a more self aware and effective communicator in the organizational setting.

Further, the experiential component of such a course, to realistically simulate the influence of theoretically important variables, must involve repeated interactions, over extended periods of time, both within and between groups; allowing time for naturalistic leadership emergence, norm evolution, social bonding, trust (and distrust) formation, mixtures of individual and shared (or group) motivations to cooperate and compete, completion of subtasks (the assessment of which will influence future assignment of personnel to tasks), evolution of secondary and tertiary conflicts and turf disputes, etc., etc., etc. In other words, the argument runs, the experiential simulation of organizational behavior in such a class, to be effective, must be extensive, complex, and continuous to be realistic and pedagogically effective.

The danger, of course, is that students can become so involved in producing fictional marbles or fireworks that they lose sight of

the need to study theory which could help them make behavioral decisions which would result in more effective marble or firework production.

The classic problem for the instructor of a course in organizational communication, therefore, is how to structure a course which provides a realistically complex and extensive experiential simulation of organizational social dynamics over time, while still providing adequate theoretical input to facilitate a student's disciplined conceptual understanding of those dynamics at a level of abstraction which will apply to future organizational experiences in which the student will want to apply what he or she is learning in the course.

One approach to resolving this problem is to design the course itself as an organizational simulation, with the purpose of the organization being related to the integrated, critical learning of organizational theory. Having designed, taught, and revised such a course for the past three years, my purpose in this essay is to share the results of that experience with others who might benefit from it.

Course components and rationale

Two books are required for the course: 1) a textbook which provides an integrated, developmental overview of organizational communication theory, and 2) an extensive anthology of primary source material in organizational communication. Currently in use are Charles Conrad's Strategic Organizational Communication for the former, and an anthology entitled Readings in Managerial Psychology, edited by Leavitt, Pondy and Boje, for the latter. What is important is that the text review the development of theory in the area, and that the anthology be extensive, providing depth of coverage in key theoretical areas.

The role of the textbook, Strategic Organizational Communication, is to provide an integrated conceptual overview of the role of communication in organizations which can serve as a framework within which other information and experience can be interpreted. There are twelve chapters in this present text, and students read them at the rate of one per week for the bulk of the semester.

The role of the anthology, Readings in Managerial Psychology, in the course is to provide more in-depth coverage of key issues in organizational communication, knowledge of which is necessary to determining strategies for effectively communicating in organizational settings. For example, the importance of

defensiveness as a commonly occuring block to effective communication in organizations might be mentioned in many contexts in the text. In the anthology, students read about defensive climates more extensively in an article written by one of the foremost theorists in the field, Jack Gibb. Similarly, each of the other articles provides greater depth of coverage than the text of some important concept in organizational behavior which fits into the overview provided by the text.

To provide practice at recognizing the variables students are reading about as they experience them, so that they can use what they are learning effectively to make good, strategic communication decisions, they participate in an organization in class; that is, students coordinate a portion of their efforts in the class to accomplish a joint goal and (hopefully) use what they are learning to do this effectively.

The joint task students organize to accomplish in this class is the creation of an examination to test their knowledge of the articles in Readings in Managerial Psychology. Each student is a member of one of several teams of four or five members, each of which is assigned to accomplish this task. The members of the teams which do the best (qualitative) job, by criteria which are specified, have a competitive advantage with regard to the final grade; and this is especially true of those individuals who best

apply what they are learning about communication in their dealings with others in the class. Since most students, even at the graduate level, consider the task to be a daunting one, the need to organize in order to divide the labor is perceived as real. The design of the course, described below in detail, provides incentives for both cooperation and competition both within and between groups, as well as a setting in which repeated task oriented interactions will result in leader emergence, agenda setting and workflow problems, and many of the other problems associated generically with organizational processes.

As students work through a series of exercises early in the term designed to help them identify people they could work with effectively, form teams, and work with others on those teams to accomplish the test writing task, they are encouraged to use the material they are studying to guide their decision making with regard to how best to accomplish the task. The instructor consults and advises as needed and requested, and students are encouraged to use him/her as a consultant/resource person whenever they have difficulty deciding how to proceed as a group, or as an individual within a group. When appropriate, given the ongoing interactions of the teams, the instructor also provides lecture material or exercises selected to stimulate an awareness of the ways in which theoretical variables are influencing students' organizational efforts. (N.B.: this means that the

exact content of the course, as well as the order of its presentation, has to be adjusted and tailored to the interactions of each class to an unusually large degree. It also means that instructor availability for extensive student consultation is a necessary ingredient in running this course successfully).

By the end of the term students not only have an enhanced understanding of the effects which organizational communication of different types are likely to have on a organization's effectiveness under different conditions, but also an enhanced ability to recognize those conditions in practice and know what they <u>feel</u> like.

Thus, by the end of the term students are expected to be able to objectively analyze their <u>own</u> effectiveness as participants in the class organization, and to make defensible recommendations as to how they could have communicated more effectively, if they had it to do over again.

Assignments, structure, and grading.

(N.B.: The following is based on one class meeting of four hours per week, for a semester of approximately fifteen weeks. Obviously, adjustments would be necessary given other calendar sequences).

The assignments and grading system for the course derive directly from the goals and rationale described above, and provide incentives to accomplish the goals of the course while simulating many of the motivational forces and contextual variables that typically occur in "real world" organizational settings.

There are four major components to the course grade:

I. A Quiz Grade (25%). Throughout the term, each week normally begins with discussion of selected topics from assigned reading in the text, followed by a short, objective quiz over that reading which both contributes to the course grade and serves as a diagnostic mechanism for identifying which material from the text require further elaboration/discussion in class. At the end of the term, the lowest quiz score is dropped, the remaining scores are totalled, and a grade is assigned to the individual's total quiz score based on a curve. The quiz grade, in other words, is determined by how well each student does, relative to

other members of the class, cumulatively over the semester.

II. An Exam Grade (25%). Each student is a member of a work group or team in class assigned the task of creating an examination over the material in the anthology (Readings in Managerial Psychology) which meets specifications provided early in the term. Essentially, the criteria are for questions: 1) in objective form, 2) covering pragmatically useful concepts and principles, which are 3) divisible into separate questions, and 4) presented, with answers, on index cards with one question to a card. (Criterion 4 triggers discussion of the desireability of designing workflow so that output from one step is suitable input for the next. These stipulations make the final editing process much simpler). Each team is responsible for turning in its exam in specified form on a date approximately four class meetings before the end of the term. Using the specified criteria, the best parts of the exams the teams have produced are selected, and an exam over the anthology material is constructed by the instructor from those parts which approximates the average length of the exams produced by the groups. Students, as individuals, take this exam the following week. Grades for this exam are assigned on a curve, based on gaps in the distribution of scores which distinquish levels of performance.

Experience has shown that an exam developed in this way discriminates remarkably well, in spite of the obvious dangers of prior knowledge, because of the accumulated impact of different levels of diligence and participation in the test writing groups throughout the term. Since the components of the exam students take are the best parts of each team's exams, the team which does the best job, qualitatively (that is, makes the best organizing decisions about how to work together) sees more of its own questions on the exam, and is relatively advantaged thereby. Also, and more important, the most actively productive individual team members are advantaged on the curve, because they are more familiar with the material.

III. A Paper Grade.(25%) As an incentive to be constantly on the alert for ways to use the material they are studying to find ways to improve their group's performance, students, as individuals, are asked toward the end of the term to write a paper which: 1) describes how their team functioned throughout the term, 2) analyzes, using the theory they have studied, the effectiveness of the organizational decisions they and their teammates have made throughout the term, and 3) suggests and defends ways in which their team might have operated differently and more effectively if they had it to do over again. This paper is typed, double spaced, proofread, etc., and is due the class after the exam over the anthology is taken. Each student is required to

present this paper to all members of his or her work team, as well as to the instructor. These differing retrospective analyses provide fodder for the final portion of performance evaluation (peer evaluation, described below), and the knowledge that the instructor will grade them for rigorous argument, evidence, etc., mitigates the temptation to groupthink and unrealistically positive performance assessments which might otherwise occur.

IV. Peer Evaluation.(25%) After each student has worked out his/her individual assessments of how well his or her team worked together, and why, in the papers described above, they share these assessments with other members of their teams. They then collaborate on a mutually acceptable evaluation of the group's performance, and of each member's contribution to it. One result of this collaboration is an oral group report on the lessons learned, presented to and discussed with the rest of the class at the final class meeting. Another result is a grade sheet, provided to the instructor at that last class, giving each member of the group a grade for participation, the average of which for the group may not exceed a 3.0 (for an undergraduate class) or a 3.5 (for a graduate class). There's only so much profit to spread around as bonuses in any organization, after all! For reasons which are theoretically obvious, but pragmatically awkward in social practice, each group is strongly encouraged to make the criteria they will use in this peer evaluation an early agenda

item at the beginning of the semester. As with many aspects of the course, many groups conclude that "it can't happen here," and that they can ignore this advice. Usually, conflict erupts in such groups at this final phase, at which point the lesson that it's silly to assume oneself to be immune to forces which affect others finally "sinks in" (sometimes).

General considerations in running the course.

The course is designed to integrate theory and practice in such a way as to stimulate introspection and self awareness - and especially to stimulate awareness of the areas in which each student would benefit most from altering his or her behavior - and might therefore be tempted to rationalize, respond defensively to feedback, resort to scapegoating, etc. The course, in other words, is different than some other courses - and is different in ways which make it more tempting for students to adopt, and get trapped in, what Kenneth Burke calls a "tragic frame of reference." The value of the course to each student depends in part on his or her ability to resist these temptations (easy for some, harder for others, depending on a number of cognitive and self concept variables) - to adopt a "comic frame of reference." As the Conrad text presently used in the course says, "Adopting comic frames, and avoiding tragic ones, is the one necessary ingredient for effective strategic communication."

(p. 206). Experience has shown that students who manage to adopt and maintain a "comic frame" with regard to this course find it to be both valuable and enjoyable.

This involves accepting it for what it is, rather than imposing expectations based on prior class experiences on it. Comic frames "require people continually to question their assumptions, perceptions and interpretations." (Conrad, p.206). Familiarizing students with the course structure, rationale and expectations at the first class meeting is, therefore, particularly important to maximizing the value of the course for them. This is easily accomplished by including in the first class session discussion of entry politics, socialization, and reference frames as they relate both to the class and to organizations generally. In the course of this discussion, and in the syllabus, it is important to make the following points:

1) What this course is not is a traditional lecture based course, and

2)What this course is is a structured set of experiences and requirements which place more of the responsibility for organizing, as well as implementing, the student's learning on the student than in a traditional course. The instructor's role in this course is less "Bringer of Truth" and more "managing

consultant/resource person" than is usual in the classroom.

Unless these points are made explicitly, there will ineveitably be students, even in a graduate class, who will not "get it," and who will be critical at the end of the term because there was not more lecture material and "normal" class interaction. Interestingly, many such students do <u>eventually</u> "get it" in retrospect. It is not unusual for students who have completed this course to call as much as a year later with stories of on the job experiences which they related to class experiences, and consequently responded to differently than they otherwise might have - and the propensity to make such connections is not strongly related to the student's recognition of the value in the course when he or she is in it. However, the number of students who <u>do</u> recognize that value while they are taking the course, and who therefore benefit more and earlier from it, is greater if they are thoroughly prepared for its difference from "normal" courses.

Once these points have been made, topic areas and exercises should be selected and timed to correspond to experiences of the class. Beginning with impression formation exercises which enable students to "scout out" potential work partners, and interpreting these exercises as simulations of job search and recruitment, helps to establish a "comic frame" early on, and to relieve grade

anxiety. To reveal each student's diligence, preparation, creative thinking and analytic ability, uncontaminated by advantages due to prior knowledge, to potential teammates, an extensive body of materials as input to the task of designing a home for a fictional Martian have been developed. To expose propensities to cooperate or compete, as well as consequences of such choices in organizational systems characterized by long term interdependency, a Prisoner's Dilemma exercise is utilized. All of these exercises are presented in the context of group formation and teammate selection, and are therefore presented at the beginning of the semester. Conflict exercises, however, are withheld until conflict erupts between groups (which it almost ineveitably does at some point). Similarly, discussion of models of leadership is withheld until it becomes an issue in at least some groups.

The end result, then, is a course which "looks like" a typical mix of theory and practical exercises for the first few weeks, as students go through an extended period of thoroughly examined coalition formation and organizational structuring. Through the middle of the term, roughly the first half of each week's classtime continues this style, with the second half given over to the ongoing test writing groups. (Each of which <u>also</u> ends up meeting extensively outside of class - but the class time devoted to group meetings maintains instructor involvement and knowledge

as a consultant to the process). It is really only in the final three to four weeks, with the exam, analytic paper, and peer evaluation, that the classroom interaction differs obviously and dramatically from other courses, as the cumulative impact of simulated organizational forces makes itself felt. The probability of "Ah ha!" experiences among the students during this period, when the long term consequences of their own behavioral decisions are being felt, is obviously relatively high. Consequently, it is prudent for the instructor to plan on additional "drop in" conference time with individual students during the final weeks to help them sort out and explore the implications of their introspective insights.

Feedback at that point, as well as from former students who end up <u>using</u> what they learn in this course on their jobs, indicates that such a structure does, in fact, accomplish both the goal of developing theoretical knowledge and the goal of developing pragmatic skill at communicating in organizational settings, and integrates the two.

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